

2

Dominic passed time waiting. He waited to be fed, he waited to be bathed, and he waited for his morphine. He didn't wait as a patient man waits. Patience implies a willingness to sacrifice a certain amount of time. Time was one thing that Dominic didn't have much of. It was the cruel irony of a debilitating terminal illness—knowing you don't have much time left, yet being forced to wait for everything.

Despite the hopelessness of his situation, Dominic still managed to derive at least some degree of pleasure. Although the morphine clouded his mind most of the day, he timed the doses so that he would be coherent at sunset. Every evening, Sarah sat and talked with him by the ocean as the sun slipped beneath the water, smearing the western sky with its red-orange hue. He watched the horizon and felt the cool evening trade winds brush against his face, and he would remember. He spoke of the past to Sarah, and that made him happy. When he could stand the pain no longer, she gave him the injection, and he faded off into unconsciousness. Until today, the sunsets and his memories were all he had left. For months, he had struggled to ignore the bleak present as well as any thoughts of the onrushing future. Dominic's only comfort was in revisiting better times, and even those memories were ruthlessly stolen from him much of the day by the drugs. Living without a present made a man's soul sick. It was as if he wasn't included in his own life. Instead, he was forced to live in a world that no longer existed.

Today, however, things were different. Today he found himself looking *forward* to something. The feeling was almost startling, like

when he came out of his morphine haze at dusk or when he awoke from a sound sleep. Looking forward to something made him part of life again, and it was all because of Lázaro. His old friend would be here soon, hopefully with the chessboard in tow.

By now, if he had figured correctly, Lázaro would have left the mainland and would be somewhere in the keys. He was envious. The stretch of highway between Key Largo and Key West was one of the most beautiful he'd ever driven—or helped build, for that matter. He hadn't been behind the wheel much at all in the last five years or so, but up until the cancer, he would still enjoy drives with friends. Now, his only outings were to visit the hospital in Key West where the doctors would choose different words to tell him the same thing: he was dying.

Dominic's once tall, muscular form had withered away to less than 120 pounds, and the skin that hung loosely over his deeply sunken face had faded from the dark tan of his youth to a sickly yellow-gray tint. He had aged well up until the tumors had taken hold, but now he could feel his body failing. An early attempt at chemotherapy had cost him the rest of his hair. Worst of all, Dominic was always in pain. The drugs dulled it to a bearable level, but never erased it. In his earlier years, he had had the look of a southern California surfer: tall and lean, with sandy hair faded from the saltwater and tropical sun. Now, as a frail, dying man addicted to narcotic painkillers, it was hard to imagine who he once was. But he could remember, at least some of the time, back to when things were different. And when he thought of those times, he thought of Lázaro. He had asked Sarah to reduce his dosage today so he could be clear minded for his friend. The tradeoff was a thick pain between his groin and the middle of his chest. He would endure it today. He would do it for Lázaro. As the morphine slowly left his system, the memories were allowed to return.



He first came to the Florida Keys in 1932. Fresh out of the University of Chicago, he put his civil engineering degree to work inspecting the railroad bridges that connected the mainland to Key West. Although completed nearly twenty years before his arrival, the structures that spanned the water and carried the weight of the trains had to be continually monitored for wear. The Key West Extension, as it was called, ran daily excursions from Miami to Key West. At half past seven in the morning, a departure from Miami would arrive in Key West before noon, all for \$4.75 and \$2.50 on Sundays. For an additional \$20, passengers could transfer to a steamer in Key West and within a few hours be standing on the docks in Havana. It was a magnificent trip that he made many times.

Dominic was a brilliant engineer, gifted with mathematical abilities that left even his professors at Chicago amazed. In his first year, he had been accused of cheating at the university after completing a calculus exam without error in half the allotted time. There had been talk of expulsion until, in front of a committee and the dean, he solved every problem presented to him, writing his steps out on the chalkboard only after he was asked to show how he had arrived at his answers.

Submitting to his abilities, Dominic pursued a career in engineering. It came effortlessly to him. He often wished that his gifts lay elsewhere, however, perhaps anthropology or a natural science. People's behavior and the random systems in the natural world fascinated him. While engineering taught him about order, nature taught him about chaos. Together, they would ultimately provide him with a valuable life lesson: some things could be controlled in this world, and others simply could not.

Dominic eagerly accepted the opportunity to work on this particular railroad. It was a marvel of modern engineering, brilliantly incorporated into one of nature's most awesome creations. At the time of its construction, *Scientific American* called the project "one of the most difficult works of railroad ever attempted." Since the Overseas Highway was already under construction in the upper keys and soon to be following in the railroad's path, he assumed that he would be making the switch to road engineering in a short time. That suited him just fine. In addition to giving Dominic the chance to apply his training, the project gave him an excuse to travel to a place he'd always wanted to visit.

Born and raised in the city, Dominic had never seen anything like the Florida Keys. In fact, when compared to his home in the Midwest, it may as well have been another country. The climate, the openness of the ocean, and the culture were new and exciting to Dominic. He had taken to the keys instantly, and were it not for a war a decade later, he never would have left.

Dominic adapted quickly to the island chain. All visible signs of his Midwest roots vanished behind a deep tan. He wore cut-off cotton trousers when he worked. In spite of his superior position as an engineer, he enjoyed spending time with the local laborers and even convinced his supervisor to let him live in one of the work camps. The crude barracks were crowded and hot, but Dominic enjoyed the men's camaraderie and easygoing nature. The camps housed an interesting mix of United States veterans and workers from Southern Europe, the Cayman Islands, and the Bahamas. Dominic was fascinated with these men and spent as much time as he could talking to them and learning about their homelands. The workers accepted him quickly, although many couldn't understand why a well-paid engineer would choose to live in the camps. At night, he often told stories of Chicago, still in the tight grips of a bitter Illinois winter and Prohibition. The men would listen with interest as he

told of a city gripped with fear of corruption, violence, and men named Colosimo, Torrio, and Capone. Although many had never seen a big city, Dominic learned from the workers that running rum between the keys and Cuba could be just as dangerous as the illegal whisky trade that had taken place in his own hometown.

Dominic was living the life of a common laborer yet earning the wage of an engineer. The result was a fair amount of money that he didn't know how to spend. Although he lived in a bunkhouse and had very few possessions, Dominic had found a simple happiness in the keys that he had never experienced in Chicago. Wasting money on a house, expensive clothes, or dining seemed absurd when he preferred to spend his evenings at the camp along the ocean. He mailed most of his salary back to Chicago, where his father invested it for him. Years would pass before he knew how shrewd an investor his father had been. Dominic would find himself a wealthy man by the age of forty-five.

He forged many friendships during that first season at the camp. None of them, however, would be as profound as his friendship with Lázaro. Dominic was spending the day on Key West when they first met. An old Bahamian rail worker had sold him a beautiful chess set, and loving games of any kind, Dominic couldn't wait to play. He stopped into Sloppy Joe's tavern for a beer with the hopes of finding a match. It was there that he met Lázaro and the games began.

Dominic had never met anyone like Lázaro. Dominic's approach to strategy, whether to his work or to games, was based on the numeric truths that seemed so apparent to him. Lázaro, however, instinctually related everything to azimuths and distances, as if he could meet life's challenges by simply plotting the proper course through them. When he explained things, he always used directions. Even during a game he would occasionally say things like, "I should have moved my bishop southeast." Lázaro's lack of formal tactics

made little sense to Dominic. In fact, after their first few games, he was genuinely surprised that Lázaro could beat him.

Adhering to specific principles, Dominic's game was constructed within the framework of well-established strategies. Moving the same piece twice during an opening, developing his pieces exclusively on one side of the board, pinning Lázaro's King's knights before castling, exchanging bishops for knights early in the game—these were all avoided. His calculating mind would run patiently through various scenarios during each phase of play until he had identified what he felt was the best approach. Only then, often after several minutes had passed, would he commit his piece. Once he did, Lázaro would nod, look at the board, and quickly move, at times making careless errors. Yet in spite of Lázaro's impatience, he had a certain feel for the game, and when playing at his best, he seemed to control the flow of the game effortlessly, without showing the tense concern for each individual move that Dominic did. While the two had very different playing styles, they were well matched. Both played to win, but regardless of the victor, each game ended in a handshake and a "good game," no matter how poorly the other might have played.



Sarah rolled him onto the wooden deck behind the house so he could face the water and wait for his friend. The years of wind and heavy ocean air had scoured the white deck until the finish had a dull, worn look to it that Dominic liked. Sarah had arranged colorful clay pots with local orchids and passionflower vines along its edge, and the smell was wonderful. Standing in the corner was a small potted key lime tree that would soon outgrow its planter and long outlive its owner. The deck offered a stunning view of the turquoise blue water through a small stand of royal palms lining his

shoreline. Dominic usually sat in the corner, shaded by a tangled banyan tree that rose crookedly above the flooring. His world had grown small with the onset of disease, but it was hard not to appreciate the vast beauty of where he lived.

Sarah locked the wheels on his wheelchair and then leaned over and kissed the top of his bald head. Born and raised in southern Georgia, she had worked as Dominic's housekeeper for nearly ten years now, cleaning the house, making an occasional meal, and running errands. They had become very close in that time, although they both knew that the thirty-year age difference would have made them incompatible lovers. When Dominic became ill, she graciously and with little discussion expanded her housekeeping duties to include caregiver. Her medical responsibilities were limited to palliative care—administering morphine for his pain, feeding and bathing him—with some guidance from hospice nurses. At this advanced stage, the illness itself was not being aggressively treated. Had he chosen to stay in the hospital for these final months, his treatment would have been the same, but administered by strangers. He had the financial means, Sarah was willing, and he wasn't ready to give up his sunsets just yet. He would most likely stay at home next to the ocean until he died.

"Are you sure you don't want just a little bit, honey?" She drawled thickly. "He won't be here for a while yet."

There was no reply.

"Maybe just a pinch to—"

"No," he resolved. "I'll let you know."

"Promise?"

"I promise," he answered with a weak grin.

She smiled and rubbed his hand.

"We don't get many chances to chat during the afternoon, do we?" she said. "Maybe I'll fetch us some iced tea."

He slowly licked his parched lips and nodded.

"Dom," she started curiously, "why didn't Lázaro just fly on down? I could have picked him up from the airport. It sure seems like a long drive for a man of—"

She caught herself.

"A man of his age?" Dominic finished with a pained grin.

"Well," she said. "He didn't mention that he was going to drive the whole dang way."

"Crazy Lázaro," he said, smiling. "He wouldn't think twice about taking a little runabout out into ten-foot seas, but he won't get anywhere near an airplane." There were long gaps between his words, as if the energy he expended fighting the pain left little for speaking.

"Is he afraid to?"

"I don't really know if he's scared of the flying itself or if he just doesn't trust someone else to get him where he needs to go. He doesn't like trains or buses either. He's always been funny that way."

"But he'll be all right?"

"He'll be just fine. I can just imagine him driving all this way."

Dominic chuckled to himself at the image before continuing. "It must be quite a sight."

Sarah wiped the saliva off his chin. "It's nice to see you laugh, sugar" she said, getting up for the tea. "You sure? Just a little?"

He shook his head and looked back at the ocean.

"I love you, Sarah."

"I love you too, Dommie."

He had started regularly telling her that he loved her about a month ago. He always had, and recently he had seen nothing wrong with letting her know. In fact, it seemed much more important now. He loved her as a man loves a friend or a family member, but there was more to it. His marriage had ended badly ages ago, leaving him with no children, and Sarah was the most important part of Dominic's life. She treated his deteriorating body and, perhaps

more importantly, she took care of his deteriorating spirit. In some ways, she knew his needs better than he did. Recently, when it became clear that time was running out, she'd made the call to Lázaro—a man she'd never met—without even asking Dominic. When he'd asked her about it, she just shrugged.

"Why *wouldn't* I call him?" she'd replied, as if his asking was absurd. "I do actually listen to you occasionally when we talk."

Then she'd sat down next to him and continued. "I know what y'all meant to each other. In fact, it kind of seems like I know him already." She hesitated for a moment and then continued. "What I don't understand is why after all these years he never came back to visit you. Seems to me like he would have by now." She paused. "You know, I don't take care of you because it's fun. Heck, I'm not even getting any romance out of this deal," she teased.

Dominic grinned.

"There you go, smilin' away. I don't get how you do that. I know how bad it gets—shoot, I'm the one doling out the morphine—and yet you *still* try to look out for everybody, me included. That's why I can't figure why someone who's supposed to be a close friend hasn't come to see you yet. I don't mean to be so sour on him, but—"

Dominic gently took her hand. "It's not as strange as you might think. It's going to work out. You'll see."

"Well, whatever the reasons, you two need to be together now. And that's why I called him."

"Thank you, Sarah."

Then he'd thrown his wrinkled hands up in feigned confusion. "But I can't believe that you find all of this unromantic. Quality time at home, baths, meals, sunset drinks through a plastic straw ..."

She shook her head and slapped him on the arm. "Keep it up."

Dominic's relationship with Lázaro, while equally loving, was quite different. Much like Dominic needed Sarah, Lázaro needed him, even if Lázaro didn't know it yet. The reason was quite simple—Dominic was the only living being who knew the true Lázaro. Not the man he had been for the last fifty years, but rather the man he had turned away from. As Dominic struggled through his final days, he realized that during the course of a lifetime, a man plays many different roles, hoping to find the one that suits him eventually. Many search and tragically never find it. Others avoid it and go elsewhere, either by circumstance or by choice—something Dominic considered an even bigger tragedy.

Lázaro's life, once so true, had drifted off course after he left the keys. It wasn't that his life had been without purpose. On the contrary, he had provided for his family and raised his son, William, into a fine man—an accomplishment that escaped Dominic and left him in awe.

When Lázaro started running from his life after the war, he lost himself. Once he moved to Boston, he sank into a routine that lasted more than fifty years. The two men corresponded, but Lázaro avoided a return to the keys. Perhaps it was too painful for him to see what he had left behind. The fight for Lázaro to rediscover his roots would be against a powerful adversary: time. Not only the fleeting time that Dominic had left, but also the vast stretch of time that carved a deep rift between Lázaro and the keys.

There is nothing greater in a man's life than fulfilling his destiny, Dominic thought. *Lázaro learned this years ago, but he's forgotten. For a man who could always find his way, Lázaro is lost and doesn't even know it.*

Sarah returned carrying two glasses of iced tea with large lemon slices floating on top. She set the tea next to him and a mischievous smile crept over her face as she lifted the bottle of rum in front of him.

“Ah, my young southern belle,” he said, grinning weakly. “Are you trying to get me drunk so you can take advantage of me?”

She poured a small shot of rum into each glass. They sat next to each other in the hot afternoon sun, drinking their spiked tea, looking at the ocean, and listening to the rustle of the palms. They would wait for Lázaro together.